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ABSTRACT

This paper is a broad study of the field of black American Literature which outlines the important movements, stereotypes, and trends that have had significant influence upon the literature. The changing stereotypes and archetypes of blacks depicted in American literature from the early concept of blacks as "chattels" to the contemporary concept of black characters as "existential prototypes" is traced. The specific correlation between changing attitudes, the gradual achievement of civil rights for blacks, and changing stereotypes is noted. Specific sections deal with stereotypes, their changes and transmission in American fiction; trends, movements, and influences related to black literature; and, an evaluation of black literature. A select bibliography is appended. [This document has been reproduced from the best available copy.] (Author/RJ)

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READING BLACK LITERATURE WITH UNDERSTANDING

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PREFACE

This is a broad survey of the field of black American literature which outlines the important movements, stereotypes and trends that have had significant influence upon the literature. The paper traces, historically, the changing stereotypes and archetypes of blacks depicted in American literature from the early concepts of blacks as "chattels" to the contemporary concept of black characters as "existential prototypes." The specific correlation between changing attitudes, the gradual achievement of civil rights for blacks and changing stereotypes is noted. Hopefully, this broadly based discussion will bring new insight to the interpretation of literature by and about blacks that will lead to greater understanding of the unique problems of blacks through the enlightenment provided by literature.

INTRODUCTION

The civil rights thrust—with its accompanying demands for curriculums that reflect the ethnic pluralism of American society--has created a number of problems for those individuals who are charged with the responsibility for curricular changes.. The previous exclusion of black literature from educational programs has left educators and librarians completely unprepared for this new responsibility. Many inadequately prepared individuals found themselves in the awkward position of having been pressed into service by frantic administrators who were desperately attempting to satisfy the demands for black studies programs. Moreover, many teachers had long desired to incorporate ethnic materials into their teaching programs, but had refrained as a result of their insecurity regarding both selection and interpretation of the literature.

Like any literature unit--the effective teaching and interpretation of black literature requires an understanding of both its development and unique characteristics. A lack of this knowledge will substantially reduce the caliber of the instruction. Teaching black literature without an understanding of its influences, concepts and trends is analogous to teaching a Shakespearean unit using a text that lacks the highly essential explanatory footnotes.

There are those who discount the uniqueness of black literature and claim that black literature is no different from Anglo-American literature. Conversely, others disclaim the literature by criticizing the "difference" factor and claiming that black literature must first liberate itself from the boundaries of its ethnicity before it can achieve recognition.

Both viewpoints reflect one-dimensional perspectives. The very existence of this ethnic difference is responsible for the vitality and substance of the literature. Undeniably, black literature is an integral part of the Anglo-American literature. However, to deny its uniqueness is ludicrous. The very nature of black literature — borne as it was from a separatist majority culture — has of necessary taken on separate and unique characteristics. Clearly, the black experience has been different from the white. In fact, these unique characteristics give black literature the same universally dramatic — but "different" — characteristics that apply internationally to literature. Sean O'Casey's Irish literature, Karamazov's Russian literature, and Joyce's English literature are examples of international ethnic literature. No rational individual would disclaim the validity of the ethnic characteristics inherent in the works of these renowned gentlemen. The controversy surrounding black literature is a reflection of the larger conflict between the dominant white Anglo-Saxons, on the one hand, and the non-white groups on the other.

The purpose of this discussion is to provide in capsule account of the development, trends and concepts that are important to an understanding of black literature. The accompanying bibliography will provide a bridge

to an in-depth examination of the subject for those who wish to explore the subject further. The psychological factors which underlie the concepts will be examined only briefly in this discussion. Again, the bibliography will aid individuals who wish to pursue these highly important areas.

STEREOTYPES: THEIR CHANGES AND TRANSMISSION IN AMERICAN FICTION

Classification is the result of man's automatic response to diversity. Historically, man has always labeled and placed into neat little categories those factors of an environment that were "different." The black experience has been different from the white--and, obviously, some distinct patterns have arisen as a result of a common restrictive social environment. However, the practice of portraying an entire race of people by attempting to reduce them to the lowest common denominator--ignoring their individual deviations--results in harmful stereotyping.[1]

Stereotypes may have surface appearances of being innocuous caricatures of human idiosyncrasies. However, they set up chain reactions of negativism. The great danger of stereotypes lies in their adverse influence upon attitudes. Moreover, attitudes built upon distorted images foster massive cultural barriers between groups.

Considering the problems prevalent today in the area of inter-group relations, it is particularly important for educators and librarians to understand the relationship

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[1]Nancy M. Tischler, Black Masks: Negro Characters in Modern Southern Fiction (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1969), pp. 1-23.

between attitudes, stereotypes and concepts--as they relate to literature written about blacks.[2] The importance of the role-playing aspect of stereotypes cannot be overemphasized, because historically, stereotypes have been the process through which the dominant group has prepared itself emotionally to perform a social role. Thus, the function of stereotypes is both personal and political.[3] Clearly, black characters depicted in early American literature mirrored the moralistic attitude of the dominant group. Although writers of fiction are generally novelists, rather than sociologists, they inevitably react to the intellectual and social forces that dominate their particular time.[4] "When doubt arose concerning the validity of using human beings as salable commodities, shifts in attitudes were conveniently made to preserve the concept of white superiority by further demonstrating black inferiority."[5] Therefore, black characters never enjoyed the full characterization common to other characters in the literature, but were depicted rather as types or genres.

Since blacks were considered subhuman, deep psychological probing or introspective studies of black characters never occurred. Black characters were always hollow shells

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[2] Jean A. Alexander, "Black Literature for the Culturally Deprived Curriculum," English Journal (December, 1970), 1229-33.

[3] Ralph Ellison, Shadow and Act (New York: Random House, 1953), p. 45.

[4] Tischler, p. 12. [5] Starke, p. 29.

without substance, savages who had been rescued from their free pagan existence and transferred to the civilized confines of Western slavery. Tischler contends that:

> The stereotype, then, is a refusal to come to grips with the ambiguity, diversity and complexity of human nature. To classify Negroes, as Ellison feels most Southerners do even today in two categories: "good niggers" and "bad niggers"--the one the suffering servant, the other the hairy ape--is to ignore their humanity and to reject the anguish of recognition that could enrich thought and art. When the artist accepts codified patterns of thought, he is usually embracing facile, shallow fictions and rejecting the density of texture that the more tragic perceptions would allow him. Yet in spite of the demonstrated iniquity of such techniques, most Southern writers do reflect their society by their insistence on racial patterns underlying individual actions or their exaggerated rejection of all patterns.[6]

Thus, stereotypes represent the extremes in ideosyncrasies, and do not allow for "real human beings." Human beings are composites of a number of characteristics which may or may not reveal themselves--depending upon the situation. Conrad's Lord Jim, for example, allowed cowardice to guide his behavior, when he thought the ill-fated Patena was sinking. Yet, he exhibited heroic characteristics during a later crisis. Undoubtedly, stereotypes have prevented blacks from exhibiting the normal human characteristics that would allow readers to relate to them in a personal manner. Mark Twain was one of the few nineteenth century authors who used the black--not simply as a personification of idealistic primitivism nor as a caricature of a merry menial --but as a real human being.[7]

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[6]Tischler, p. 23. [7]Ibid., p. 29.

Literature before 1800 depicted blacks as accomodative chattels, as counter-images to the chattels, and as buffoons that were outgrowths of the chattels.[8]

"Noble savages" populated eighteenth century fiction and "philosophic mammies" replaced them in the nineteenth century.[9] The "Mammy" stereotype represented the loyal, but inferior, mother figure to whom white mothers customarily relinquished the nursing and rearing of their white children.[10]

The latter part of the nineteenth century saw the introduction of the "brute nigger" character. Unlike the "freed slave" image, who, although freed, chose to remain in the service of his master--the "brute" stereotype was developed in order to vilify those blacks who had the effrontery to challenge the doctrine of white supremacy and to promote the doctrine of black equality.[11] After the Reconstruction, when blacks expressed a desire for economic advancement and civil rights, white authors proportionally portrayed them as "insulting brutes" and "rapists." This stereotype shot up to full growth in the first decades of the twentieth century.[12] Ironically, Richard Wright capitalized on the "brute" stereotype by converting it to the

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[8] Catherine Juanita Starke, Black Portraiture in American Fiction (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1971), p. 20.

[9] Ibid., p. 24.

[10] Starke, p. 125.

[11] Ibid., p. 61.

[12] Sterling Brown, The Negro in American Fiction (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1937), p. 63.

"brutalized" Negro archetype in his novel Native Son.[13]

Brown summarizes Plantation fiction of the Reconstruction period thusly:

> Plantation tradition of the Reconstruction added realism of speech and custom, but with few exceptions, this realism was subordinated to the purpose of showing the mutual affection between the races which the North had partially destroyed in a foolish war. Negro characters, at their best, are shown only in relationship with kindly southern whites; at their worst with predatory Yankees. They are never shown in relationship to themselves. They are confined to the two opposite groves of loyalty or ingratitude.[14]

The "buffoon" or "grinning Negro" stereotype prevailed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The "buffoon" stereotype's only purpose was for amusement. The "buffoon" was portrayed as a combination of the laughably ridiculous and the grotesque.[15] Benjamin Brawley deplored the fact that as late as 1916 the idea of a black as a serious figure in literature--"one who is intelligent, cultured . . . and does not smile"--was still incomprehensible to some people."[16] Paul Drane noted that Dinah, a Negro, smiles and grins through fifty-eight volumes of The Bobbsey Twins.[17]

"We Wear the Mask" is one of Paul Laurence Dunbar's most famous poems and, interestingly, one of his few poems written without dialect:

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[13]Seymore L. Gross and John Edward Hardy, Images of the Negro in American Literature (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 16.

[14]Brown, p. 62. [15]Starke, p. 65. [16]Gross, p. 18.

[17]Paul C. Drane, "The Persistence of Uncle Tom: An Examination of the Negro in Children's Fiction Series," Journal of Negro Education, Vol. 37 (1968), p. 143.

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes--
This debt we pay to human guile:
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouths with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be otherwise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
WE WEAR THE MASK.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but Oh, the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;

But let the world dream otherwise,
WE WEAR THE MASK.[18]

The paradox of the "comic mask" was even more tragic considering the failure of the dominant group to see beyond the skin; the color, the grin, or the picturesque externalities. Locke, commenting upon white writers of the period, stated:

> Occasionally there was some penetration into the heart and flesh of Negro characters, but to see more than the humble happy peasant would have been to flout the fixed ideas and conventions of an entire generation. For more than artistic reasons, indeed, against them, these writers refused to see the tragedy of the Negro and capitalized his comedy. The social conscience had as much need for this comic mask as the Negro.[19]

From the early 1800s to the first half of the 1900s, a number of stock images persisted. Among those most prevalent were the "bad nigger," "minstrel buffoon," "slow-witted porter," and "Uncle Tom" stereotypes.[20]

Although the "comic, dull-witted Negro" stereotype persisted, the 1920s saw the introduction of the "tragic mulatto,"

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[18]Arna Bontemps, American Negro Poetry (New York: Hill and Wang, 1963), p. 16.

[19]Alain Locke, ed. The New Negro (New York: Atheneum, 1955), p. 31.

[20]Starke, pp. 29-72.

and "the exotic primitive."[21]

The "tragic mulatto" was the visible symbol of lust and miscegenation. His characteristics generated early conscienticus feelings among whites regarding the enslavement of people, who like themselves, were observably white. The mulattoes were also known as quadroons or octoroons. The quadroon had one black grandparent, the octoroon had one black great grandparent. Mulattoes were generally offspring of quadroon or octoroon concubines of white slave masters.[22]

The "exotic primitive" was the symbol of freedom from cultural taboo; the noble savage who is unaffected by contacts with Western culture. Their names are generally exotic, such as Dagoo in Moby Dick (1851) and Bras-Coupe in Cabel's Grandissimes (1880).[23] Gast notes that Indians and Mexican-Americans have also been affected by the "exotic primitive" stereotype.[24]

Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel Uncle Tom's Cabin introduced the classic and controversial character, Uncle Tom. This work was the first conspicuous example of the Negro as a literary subject.[25] Starke describes Uncle Tom as an excellent example of the sacrifice symbol--or victim of environmental determination. "He is an emotionally attached father-daddy accomodationist . . . the black Christ symbol in the novel."[26]

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[21] Ibid. [22] Gross, p. 10. [23] Starke, pp. 88-89.

[24] David K. Gast, "The Dawning of the Age of Aquarius for Multi-Ethnic Children's Literature," Elementary English, Vol. 47 (1970), p. 663.

[25] Locke, p. 30. [26] Starke, pp. 107-12.

While Uncle Tom generated great sympathy for the abolitionist's cause as the loyal, all enduring servant, his name has become symbolic among blacks today of the "blind Negro"--a person who is blind to his own self-identity and to his rightful place in society. Alice Black discusses "sight" imagery in Ellison's Invisible Man in relation to the "Uncle Tom" concept. "Lack of sight in a Negro indicates him as an "Uncle Tom," one who accepts and praises the impositions of the whites and insists that he is content with them."[27]

Sympathetic though she is to the black man's cause, Mrs. Stowe's characters reflect the usual catalogue of stereotypes: the tragic mulatto, the comic Sambo and the faithful retainer.[28]

Blacks became increasingly dissatisfied with the black Christ image, and Alaine Locke echoed the dissatisfaction, when he announced in his The New Negro (1925) that "the day of the aunties, uncles and mammies is gone . . . . Uncle Tom and Sambo have passed on."[29]

Black characters generally lost their dialect during the 1950s. The use of dialect had been a pervasive stereotype that persisted tenaciously until the 1950s when agitation for civil rights became a major issue. The change in the use of dialect is very well illustrated by some of the early literature series. The Bobbsey Twins Series in 191[illegible]

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[27]Alice Block, "Sight Imagery in Invisible Man," The English Journal (1969), 1019-24.

[28]Tischler, p. 24. [29]Locke, p. 5.

contained two familiar characters, Sam, a black handyman, and Dinah, his wife. A typical conversation between them was: "What's aa dish year I heah Nan say? . . . What you gone and done to yo' l'il broth' an sistah?"[30]

However, by 1953 Sam retained only a trace of dialect as illustrated by the following excerpt: "Well, I don't know . . . . Folks say that if a horseshoe is thrown so that it lands with the two ends pointing toward you, that means good luck."[31]

Dinah's conversational pattern was similar to Sam's, however; a new version of In the Country was written and published in 1950 in which Dinah not only spoke without dialect, but her grammar had improved decidedly.[32]

Alexander Pop, a black character in the Rover Boys Series, was also illustrative of the change. Alec says in The Rover Boys in the Mountains: "Yo' is a sight fo' soah eyes, deed yo' is." Almost twenty-five years later, in The Rover Boys Shipwrecked, Alec's speech has changed noticeably: "Can't say as I's much younger, but I certainly doan feel no older."[33]

Names and illustrations have been used as convenient vehicles for transmitting stereotypes and thus to reinforce concepts of inferiority. Names were selected that ridiculed by their implication. The lowly handyman was given contrastingly impressive names as a form of abasement. Two examples of this practice were The Tom Swift Series and Across the

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[30]Drane, p. 140. [31]Ibid. [32]Ibid. [33]Drane, p. 141.

Cotton Patch. A black character in The Tom Swift Series was given the name Eradicate Andrew Jackson Abraham Lincoln Sampson.[34] Ellis Credle's Across the Cotton Patch (1935), a story of plantation life, involved black twins whose names were "Atlantic" and "Pacific"--names that were not only "unchild-like," but implied a lack of "humanness."[35]

The black prince in The Voyages of Dr. Dolittle (1922) was named Bumbo, a euphemism for "Bumbler." Although the book is considered a classic among children's books, it is blatant in its stereotyped and racist imagery. Africans are revealed as stupid, unaware--and created for the purpose of exploitation by whites. Throughout, "blackness" is depicted in a degrading, negative manner.

Early children's books were particularly guilty of stereotyped illustrations. Pictures of white children were always charming and cherubic, while those of black children were grotesque little pickaninnies. Helen Bannerman's Little Black Sambo was typical of this trend.[36]

The New York Times in its review of Inez Hogan's The Nicodemus Books (1932-35) commented about the mediocrity of the stories, but claimed their redeeming feature to be the "amusing pictures of the little darky."[37]

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[34] Ibid.

[35] Dharathula Millender, "Through a Glass Darkly," School Library Journal, (December 15, 1967), p. 4573.

[36] Dewey W. Chambers, "How Now, Dr. Dolittle," Elementary English, Vol. 45 (1968), 437-45.

[37] Brown, p. 167.

As late as 1940, the trend was virtually unchanged. The Rooster Crows was selected by librarians as the most distinguished picture book for children in 1945. The illustrations showed black children with large buniony feet and bulging eyes. However, the complaints regarding the illustrations were so numerous that a new edition of the book was published in 1964 with only white children appearing.[38]

Finally, at the turn of the century, authors began to deal seriously with uneasy segments of American life. Realism became an increasingly popular trend. Most of the authors who were prominently associated with early twentieth century realism dealt in some measure with the black man. Among them were Stephen Crane, Upton Sinclair, Theodore Dreiser and Gertrude Stein.[39] The trend toward realism has meant the gradual discardance of traditional estimates. Brown contends that this new information and insight is bringing black Americans closer to the mainstream of American life.[40]

The latter part of the twentieth century has seen an almost 360 degree cycle from the "grinning ape" stereotype to the existentialistic archetype. Ester Jackson succinctly describes the situation:

> The discovery that 'an ever larger segment of humanity seems to share the kind of existence which has been the lot of the Negro'--alienation from the larger community, isolation within abstract walls, loss of freedom, a legacy of despair--has led to a literary view of the Negro as a 'prototype" of the contemporary sense of

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[38] Nelson H. Harris, "The Treatment of Negroes in Books and Media Designed for the Elementary School," Social Education, Vol. 33, No. 4 (April, 1969), 434-37.

[39] Brown, p.110. [40] Ibid., p.130.

existential dislocation. How pervasive the archetypal view of the Negro has become is perhaps best evidenced by the large number of critics--too numerous to name--who have emphasized how the Negro in Faulkner's work is made, by symbolic extension, to transcend his sufferings, an Negro to emerge to us not as Negro but as man . . . .[41]

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[41] Gross, p. 26.

TRENDS, MOVEMENTS AND INFLUENCES

Black literature can be divided roughly into four main periods: Plantationism (1760-1864), Assimilationism (1865-1944), Reformism (1945-1954), and Militant Black Nationalism (1955-). These periods can be subdivided into smaller movements within each period. Reconstructionism and Renaissancism were part of Assimilationism, since both movements were integrationist in nature.[42] Nationalism and the present period of Revolutionaryism can both be considered part of the broader Militant Black Nationalist movement.

Writers of the first period, Plantationism, represented directly contrasting philosophies, content (pro-slavery) and discontent (anti-slavery). Since blacks during this period were illiterate, the audience for writers was white. The limited black literature of this period implied a state of euphoria on the part of the black masses and was conspicuously devoid of socio-economic references that might prove offensive to the white audience.[43] Jupiter Hammond (1720-1800?), Gustavus Vassa (1745-1801), Phillis Wheatley (1754-1784) and Lucy Terry were representative of this period.[44]

"Bars Flight" (1746), a poem written by Lucy Terry, was the first official literary work by a black person on American

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[42] Robert Bone, The Negro Novel in America (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), pp. 1-8.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Arna Bontemps, "Old Myths--New Negroes," Top of the News (January, 1970), p. 138.

soil.[45] The poem communicated an eye witness account of an Indian raid upon a small settlement in Massachusetts.[46] Phillis Wheatley has been widely acclaimed for her achievement in the realm of poetry while still a slave.

The "contented slave" was a natural part of Plantation literature.[47] Sterling Brown describes the Plantation period as a period during which white authors explained slavery as a "benevolent guardianship, necessary for a childish people's tradition from heathendom to Christianity. By stressing festivities such as harvesting, corn shucking, hunting, fishing, balls, weddings and holiday seasons, slavery was presented as an 'unbroken Mardi Gras.'"

Anti-slavery fiction came into its own during the 1830s with David Walker's Appeal (1829), an indictment against slavery.[49] 1831 was a particularly memorable year. The anti-slavery Society was established, the Nat Turner revolt occurred and William Lloyd Garrison published the first number of his famous anti-slavery newspaper, "The Liberator."[50] Unlike pro-slavery literature, slave discontent was emphasized in anti-slavery literature. Conversely, anti-slavery literature of both black and white authors concentrated on the abuses that had been omitted from pro-slavery literature; the dissolution

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[45]Ruth Miller, Blackamerican Literature (Beverly Hills: Glencoe Press, 1971), pp. 1-22.

[46]Eugene E. Simon, A Guide for Teaching the Contributions of the Negro Author to American Literature (San Diego: San Diego City Schools, 1968), p. 24.

[47]Tischler, p. 17. [48]Brown, p. 18.

[49]Chapman, p. 637. [50]Ibid., p. 31.

of families, the whippings, the indignities of the slave mart, concubinage, etc.[51]

The most prominent black writer during the abolitionist crusade was Frederick Douglass, author of Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave Written by Himself (1845). William Wells Brown was significant as the author of the first black novel, Clotel (1853), which was designed to arouse sympathy for the abolitionist cause.[52]

The Reconstruction period of Southern white literature depicted blacks as either villains or saints, depending upon the North-South allegiance of the particular character described. His role was villainous, if his allegiance was to the North and "good nigger," if his loyalty involved behavior—such as hiding his former master's treasures from the Northerners--or dividing his food from the Freedman's Bureau with his former master.[53]

Paul Laurence Dunbar was the most significant black writer of the Reconstruction era.[54] Alain Locke, the first black Rhodes Scholar, described Dunbar's work as the first authentic lyric rendition of Negro Life and culture:

> But its moods reflect chiefly those of the era of Reconstruction and just a little beyond--the limited experience of a transitional period, the rather helpless and subservient era of testing freedom and reaching out through the difficulties of life to the emotional compensations of laughter and tears. It is the poetry of the happy peasant and the plaintive minstrel . . . . But for the most part, his dreams were anchored to the minor whimsies; his deepest poetic inspiration was sentiment. He expressed a folk

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[51] Ibid., p. 45. [52] Bone, p. 20.

[53] Miller, p. 69. [54] Gross, p. 72.

> temperament, but not a race soul. Dunbar was the end of a regime, and not the beginning of a tradition, as so many careless critics, both white and colored, seem to think.[55]

Black writers of the first generation after slavery wrote as apologists in an attempt to refute the caricatures which had permeated American literature. They resented the "Jim Crow" image reflected in the writings of Harris, Page, Dunbar, and Chestnutt. The heroines of this period were frequently octoroon, modest, and beautiful--the heroes were handsome and priggish. The characters had high-flown names like "Dorlan Warthell," "Ensal Ellwood," "Tiara," and "Bles Alwyn." The incidents were romantic and often fantastic. The villains were generally poor whites.[56]

Booker T. Washington (1856-1915), president of Tuskegee University, and W. E. B. Dubois (1868-1963), Ph.D. from Harvard, dominated the period immediately after the Civil War. Washington's Up from Slavery (1901), embraced a policy of accomodation with the hope of later gains, while Dubois' The Souls of Black Folks (1903) took vigorous exception to this philosophy and insisted on immediate civil rights for blacks.[57]

Nationalism was the forerunner to the Renaissance period. It became significant after the First World War and offered hope of liberation and autonomy through an espousal of a separatist "back-to-Africa" philosophy. Marcus Garvey, West Indian leader of the United Negro Improvement Association, was its most outspoken leader.[58] Discontent was the thrust of

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[55]Locke, p. 29. [56]Brown, pp. 105-06.

[57]Simon, p. 24. [58]Tischler, p. 17.

the movement.

Perhaps the most important period in the history of black literature was the Renaissance period, because of the number of black writers who became prominent during this period. The cause of racial injustice was replaced, temporarily, by the discovery and appreciation for black folk culture. The main thrust of this movement was integrationist, rather than separatist.[59] Robert Hayden in the preface to the new edition to Alain Locke's The New Negro described the period as ". . . less of a movement, as we generally use the term, than a configuration of 'new' racial attitudes and ideals and the upsurge of creativity inspired by them and by the iconoclastic spirit of the times . . . ."[60] The movement had no formal organization and was more esthetic and philosophical than political.

There was little in American fiction about urban life for blacks before 1925. However, from 1916 on, blacks were lured to Pittsburgh with its steel mills, Detroit with its automobile factories and Chicago with its stockyards. Harlem, however, became the mecca for the Southern black, the West Indian and the African. Harlem, with its cabarets, also became the mecca for pleasure-seeking, post-war generation whites who were rebelling against Victorian prudishness, the machine-age standardization and post-war melancholia.[61]

Writers during the Renaissance period were more interested in the interpretation of black culture and its distinctive

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[59]Locke, p. xiii. [60]Ibid., p. xi. [61]Brown, p. 131.

ideosyncrasies of language, music and life style. The "exotic primitive" was a common feature of the literature.[62] Wallace Thurman's The Blacker the Berry and Claude McKay's Home to Harlem were examples of this literature.[63]

Black Harlem was described as a place of love and laughter. Struggle and oppression were de-emphasized in the literature. Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Jean Toomer, Rudolph Fischer, George Schuyer, and Wallace Thurman were the primary writers associated with this period. Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps were the most popular and prolific writers of the period--between them producing poems, plays, novels and histories.[64]

Hayden, during his discussion of the period, stated:

> Characteristic styles during this period were realism and satire, symbolism and impressionism. Obviously, some degree of disenchantment and skepticism was present. Writers during this period were creative and unafraid to experiment with new forms and techniques. This is particularly true of the poems and short stories of Jean Toomer and Eric Walrond which have an exotic flavor and tropical lushness. The use of Negro folk motifs are utilized by other writers to create distinctive rhythms and individuality of tone.[65]

Brown points out that the Harlem school, like the Plantation tradition, neglected the servitude. Except for brief glimpses, the drama of the workaday life, the struggles and the conflicts, were missing. And such definite features of Harlem as the unemployment, the overcrowded schools, the delinquency, the surly resentment--"all of those seeds that bore such bitter fruit in the Harlem riot--were all conspicuously absent."[66]

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[62]Tischler, p. 19. [63]Simon, p. 2.. [64]Ibid., p. 23.
[65]Locke, p. xii. [66]Brown, p. 140

The three outstanding exceptions during this period were Rudolph Fischer, Walter White and Countee Cullen. Fischer gives a realistic description of social life in Harlem in The Walls of Jericho, and Walter White's Flight (1926) deals with life in a small Southern town. Cullen, drawing upon his background as the son of a Methodist minister, gives authentic treatment to the place of the church in the black experience in One Way to Heaven (1932).[67]

Few novels written by blacks lack references to the church. Since the days of slavery, when religion gave promise of future salvation and rewards for their sufferings, the church has had great influence upon the lives of blacks. Often, the church has been a controversial issue between the younger and older generation of blacks. Countee Cullen's One Way to Heaven (1932), James Baldwin's Go Tell It on the Mountain (1953) and Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man (1952) are three of the titles that deal with this subject.[68]

The Reformist movement followed the Renaissance period.. Although the literary output of this period was only half of that produced during the Renaissance period (primarily due to the depression), the novels which did appear displayed a greater social realism and presented a more balanced view of the black experience than the joy-centered novels of the Harlem school. "Jazz exoticism, as a dominant tone, was abandoned in favor of social protest."[69]

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[67] Gross, p. 113.

[68] Nick Aaron Ford, The Contemporary Negro Novel: A Study in Race Relations (College Park: McGraph Pub. Co., 1936), p. 74.

[69] Brown, p. .

Richard Wright represented the culmination of the Reformist movement in black literature. Black Boy, an autobiography, and Native Son, a novel, set the trend for black literature until the beginning of the Revolutionary period of the militants. Writers represented by Reformism hoped to appeal to the moral consciousness of the dominant majority by awakening their awareness to the injustices permeating the American non-white society.[70] In addition, blacks assumed a new social consciousness which resulted in an expanded economic interpretation of the republic.

Wright was the major black writer of the '40s, and James Baldwin was the major black writer of the late '50s and early '60s.[71] Other significant writers associated with this period were Ralph Ellison, William Demby, Chester Himes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Ann Petry, William Melvin Kelly, Martin Luther King, Jr., Melvin B. Tolson, Mari Evans, Robert Hayden and Gordon Parks.[72]

Militant Black Nationalism, unlike Assimilationism, is both revolutionary and separatist.[73] Its roots extend back to the Marcus Garvey period of the early '20s. The writings of this period reflect a complete rejection of the values of the dominant majority. This movement utilizes--as its unifying agent--the element that had previously prevented the race from assimilation into the main culture. "Blackness" for this movement assumes the dual roles of unification and racial pride.

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[70]Bone, p. . [71]Chapman, p. 664.

[72]Miller, pp. 261-458. [73]Chapman, p. 664.

Militant Black Nationalist writers, unlike the Reformists, have no faith in the moral consciousness of the dominant majority and feel that civil rights must evolve from self-reliance and total change of the system.[74]

The works of this group are addressed to the black literary public, rather than the white. Major writers associated with this movement are: Leroi Jones, Eldridge Cleaver, Malcomb X, Claude Brown and Nikki Giovanni.[75]

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[74]Bone, pp. 5-6. [75]Miller, pp. 477-534.

EVALUATION OF BLACK LITERATURE

The demand for literature directly related to their ethnic history and traditions has resulted in an avalanche of materials from publishers eager to capitalize on popular public interests. Moreover, unlike the earlier period when relatively few materials were available, educators, teachers and librarians can now afford to be more selective in their acquisition policies by measuring these materials carefully against their evaluative criteria. Many titles are available that adhere to high literary standards. Those ethnic titles that fail to meet these standards should be rejected on the same grounds as other materials.[76] The term "high literary standards" does not necessarily imply books of the "great books" caliber. The term does imply, however, works comprising adequacy of literary form and structure. Those works comprising questionable form, incohesiveness, lack of continuity, awkwardness and other forms of substandard writing should be rejected immediately.[77]

Librarians who purchase sub-standard ethnic materials are guilty of a real disservice to students. The claim by some that ethnic materials are generally poorly written is evidence of the claimant's lack of familiarity with the subject.

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[76] Dorothy McKenzie during her May, 1972, speech at USC.

[77] Robert Bone, "Negro Literature in the Secondary School: Problems and Perspectives" English Journal (May, 1969), p. 512.

Clearly, librarians who purchase sub-standard ethnic materials are aiding and abetting the flow of trivia on the market. Publishers use purchase orders as yardsticks for gauging the success of particular titles. On the other hand, they are quick to respond to the demands of the buying public. Purchase of these hastily prepared, poorly written materials by librarians merely encourages their flow. As long as their titles sell, publishers can only assume that the public is satisfied:

Barbara Dodd offers additional criteria for the selection of literature by and about blacks.

1. Is the portrayal natural and real?
2. Does the story or the portrayal set standards for superiority or inferiority?
3. Does it offend the sensitivities of the group portrayed?
4. Is it free from derisive names?
5. Is the language true to the times?
6. Is the story and portrayal true to the times?
7. Are the illustrations kindly and human . . . not a caricature?
8. Does the book offer a broader understanding of living in a democratic society where all groups are valued? 78

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[78]Chambers, pp. 438-39.

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